

Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)



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## **Environmental Studies For Sitka Airport Safety Improvements Set To Begin**

During the upcoming herring spawning season, biologists will begin aquatic studies in the waters surrounding Sitka Rocky Gutierrez Airport. Their work is part of the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) required for a number of safety improvements to the Airport that have been mandated by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). The EIS is sponsored by the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (ADOT&PF), which is considering improvements to the Airport's runway safety area and seawall, installation of an approach light system, and construction of a parallel taxiway and seaplane pullout. By federal law, the EIS must examine the effects of the proposed changes on the ecosystem and the local community and economy.

Environmental specialists hired by the FAA will survey the marine mammals and birds that feed on the herring and other species drawn to herring in the waters that surround the Airport. Specialists also will map the kelp and eelgrass beds that may be altered if rock fill is required for the improvements to the seawall or the runway safety area. The mapping is expected to continue into the summer. "We are paying special attention to areas near the airport where herring have spawned consistently for decades," said FAA project manager Patricia Sullivan. Verne Skageberg, project manager with ADOT&PF, emphasized that the project team intends to include the work of local experts to document herring breeding activity. "Our goal is to document wildlife's use of special foraging opportunities and marine habitats in the proposed project vicinity in order to gauge potential effects of changing some of the airport landscape."

By examining these important biological events and the areas in which they happen, the FAA and ADOT&PF intend to make significant progress toward completing the required studies by the end of 2005. Progress on engineering designs for the construction of seawall and runway improvements is currently underway, with draft plans under agency review. Public and agency

scoping meetings for the EIS were held in early 2004, with additional public outreach expected as the study progresses.

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